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ABSTRACT

This abstract summarizes the results of a 3-month feasibility study of the education voucher plan for the City of Seattle. This study represents activities conducted as the Phase I portion of the 4-phase voucher plan (February 15-May 15, 1971). The first section focuses on activities in the State of Washington relevant to the inception of the Seattle feasibility study. The bulk of the report covers a series of preplanning tasks or problem areas that will need to be resolved prior to any decision regarding the actual establishment of the demonstration project. In each of the areas studied, several alternatives are presented as an aid to the Seattle Board of Education as it deliberates the merits of the voucher plan. Related documents are ED 049 522 and EA 003 961. (Author)

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ABSTRACT

A Preliminary Report

on

THE FEASIBILITY OF IMPLEMENTING A "VOUCHER PLAN" IN SEATTLE

Prepared by

Bureau of School Service and Research
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May, 1971

EA 004 081

The current interest for conducting a voucher feasibility study was provided through the efforts of the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) which has allocated funds for financing the operation of a limited number of pilot projects in selected major urban areas of the nation. Neither OEO nor the School Board advocate immediate conversion to a voucher system, or even a Seattle field test of a voucher system. Rather, it is proposed that Seattle undergo a series of study and planning stages prior to reaching a decision for a field testing of the plan. If it then appears feasible, the Seattle Schools would begin with a field test which would last from five to eight years. A built-in system of continuing evaluation will be an integral segment of the field test. The collection of longitudinal data on student performance and attitudes can hopefully provide for a meaningful system of evaluation at the conclusion of the field test. The Board of Education can then decide to reject or adopt some form of voucher system on a city-wide basis, based on the analysis of the data collected during the field test.

The following is a description of the activities for each phase of the voucher plan study with a projected outline of the necessary time period:

Phase I - A two to three month study of the feasibility of the field test. An advisory committee was organized to consider such things as whether or not to proceed to the next step, possible locations for the demonstration area, and how to structure the Education Voucher Agency (EVA). The report submitted to the Seattle School Board summarized the activities conducted as the Phase I portion of the voucher study (February 15 to May 15, 1971).

Phase II - A four to six month planning period to determine the selection of the demonstration area, to establish specific guidelines for the EVA, and to select a voucher system model, including selection of one of the economic models described by the Center for the Study of Public Policy, Cambridge, Massachusetts, in their report Education Vouchers, pp. 19-58 and 132-150. (July 1 to December 31, 1971)

Introduction

This report summarizes the results of a three-month feasibility study of the education voucher plan for the City of Seattle. The first section focuses upon activities in the State of Washington relevant to the inception of the Seattle feasibility study. The bulk of the report covers a series of pre-planning tasks or problem areas which will need to be resolved prior to any decision regarding the actual establishment of the demonstration project. In each of the areas studied, several alternatives are presented as an aid to the Board of Education as it deliberates the merits of the voucher plan.

Definition of a Voucher

The voucher concept provides a new method for allocating funds and assigning children to schools. In the voucher system, children are not assigned to schools by educational authorities. Rather, parents would receive a tuition voucher good for the purchase of education at any eligible voucher school of their choice. Parents would have the responsibility, if they so desire, to select the school they believe best for their child and pay for the child's education with the voucher. The voucher schools will redeem their vouchers at an Education Voucher Agency (EVA).

The Feasibility Study

This feasibility study was conducted at a time when a series of events occurred within the Seattle Public School system which served as restraining forces. The recent decision to initiate racial integration of the school system with the mandated transfer of students, the initial failure of the validation of the school levy (with the second attempt to validate conducted successfully on May 18), the uncertainty regarding the State Legislative session, and the general economic conditions that existed in the State and particularly in the Seattle area were but a few of the problems providing constraints.

Phase III - A four to six month planning period to work out details of matching children to schools, transportation systems, needed legislation and the financial details. This period would also include an extensive parent education program. The EVA would establish rules and regulations for participating voucher schools. (January 1 to September 1, 1972)

Phase IV - Field testing. The field test may begin with all children from the demonstration area participating at once, or the plan may be to phase in one or more grades at a time. (September 1, 1972 - June, 1980)

Activities and Important Considerations Involved in the Voucher Feasibility Study

The feasibility study just completed satisfies the major objectives of the Phase I portion of the OEO-Seattle Public Schools co-sponsored voucher study, which necessitated much planning prior to becoming operational. Members of the study team involved in Phase I frequently found it difficult to limit themselves only to the activities concerned with the initial efforts of the possible larger voucher demonstration project. The very nature of the planning process forces staff members to consider other component portions of the larger plan. An undertaking of the magnitude and complexity of the voucher concept applied to a large urban school system such as the Seattle Public Schools sets into operation a chain of events which, generally speaking, cannot be dealt with in isolation. Each step in the planning process is intricately related to the next, and it was necessary to map out a skeleton master planning process for the total voucher demonstration project before activities specifically related to Phase I could be undertaken.

Once Phase I became operational, events occurred with unforeseen speed. Receptivity to the voucher concept by community, political and educational groups revealed some variance in level of acceptance and rejection. In general, however, those associated with the feasibility study in Phase I endorsed continuance of the project. Phases I and II will hopefully provide the data necessary to evaluate objectively the merits of the voucher plan. The Board of Education of the Seattle

Public Schools will have at its disposal factual data related to aspects of the voucher model proposed in the OEO model as conceived by Harvard Professor Christopher Jencks.

Phase I saw the inception of the Voucher Study Committee comprised of leading citizens from numerous community and state-wide organizations. The committee raised important questions and concerns related to the voucher study. This study group may be destined to play a major role in future activities associated with the voucher demonstration project and possibly have great influence upon the Board of Education through the input of information to school officials.

Four potential voucher demonstration areas within the City of Seattle have been suggested with consideration given to the strengths and possible areas of concern associated with each of the alternatives. Locating these possible demonstration areas was accomplished following closely the criteria provided in the OEO guidelines. Each area certainly has unique advantages and continuation of the study projected for Phase II would provide additional data for assisting the Board of Education in reaching a final decision as to the actual area, should the decision be made to move into the demonstration stage.

Closely correlated with the efforts in locating potential demonstration areas was the collection of data needed for projecting the financial consideration of the voucher study. This included the preliminary efforts in assigning to the voucher a reasonable and equitable dollar figure based upon current Seattle School District costs in educating a child.

Efforts were given to needed state legislation and other legal considerations such as pending court decisions having influence upon a voucher plan. Initial draft legislation has been undertaken and continued attention to legal matters is projected for the immediate future, pending moving into Phase II.

Only cursory attention was given to organization and development of the Education Voucher Authority (EVA) as major efforts for this component of the

voucher plan are scheduled for Phase II. Consideration was given to the guidelines currently suggested by the OEO for establishing an EVA.

In an effort to identify potential alternative educational opportunities outside the Seattle Public Schools, the study staff conducted a survey of existing private and parochial schools. This was an attempt to measure the level of interest these institutions have in possibly participating in a voucher demonstration project. The level of interest appeared to be relatively high. It will be necessary in future phases of the study to explore this area in much greater detail as no consideration was given to assessing the quality of educational programs available through these schools, nor was attention given to projecting the potential for future development of new alternative schools.

Of major consideration to any voucher plan is the process of developing a system and procedure for student admissions. Much effort and attention was given to the admissions process in Phase I and the preliminary report involved a rather detailed plan which would be further developed in Phase II.

The final section of the Phase I report dealt with an important component of the voucher demonstration project - the evaluation system. The suggested evaluation system provides for a continuous process of data collection, analysis and feedback into the system to insure that those responsible for policy development and program implementation have relevant data necessary to make appropriate decisions.

As a further aid to the Seattle Board of Education, the OEO, and other individuals involved with this project, the concluding portion of the report focused upon some major concerns and issues which must be addressed in the immediate future if the voucher demonstration plan is to be successfully implemented.

The summary presented in Section III of the Phase I report entitled "The Voucher Study Committee" lists many of the advantages and some of the major concerns as perceived by members of the voucher study committee. This listing

provides a fairly detailed compilation of considerations for anyone wishing to evaluate the feasibility of a voucher plan in the Seattle area. The perceived advantages appear quite clear, and most of the disadvantages, it is felt, can be alleviated through the introduction of appropriate procedures leading to solutions. However, many of the expressed concerns will not be answered until there is an actual demonstration and appropriate evaluation devices provide test data for judging the ability of the OEO voucher model as a vehicle for adequately implementing the plan.

In addition to the concerns generated by the voucher study committee, there are six major issues of which the School Board should be well aware prior to making any decision. These are presented individually with a brief explanation of why they have been included as major issues.

Teacher Associations

The first major resistance to the voucher plan nationally and also in the Seattle area has been by the professional education associations. Both the teacher associations, the Seattle Federation of Teachers and the Seattle Teachers' Association, have expressed reservations which cannot be taken lightly. Without the support of the professional educators, any voucher plan is in serious jeopardy. A concern of the associations may well be the issue of teacher tenure. The assumption is that if the entire population receives vouchers, many of the poor or disadvantaged will choose alternatives other than the public schools for their education. This is similar to what we see taking place with a portion of the population which either moves to other locations in the city or the suburbs or has the ability to send its children to private schools. Professional staff members are, of course, concerned with the quality of education students receive. They also raise a major issue with which other groups are concerned; namely, that the quality of education will continue at the same level or be improved during the

implementation of the plan. However, the main reason for their strong resistance appears to be the issue of teacher tenure and involvement in the decision-making process. The strength of their organization rests on their political power, which is measured in terms of the number of members in the association. The National Education Association (NEA) is the largest professional organization in the world, with over a million members. State-wide and locally, the professional educators groups are perceived as being strong lobbyist groups.

The Church-State Issue

The second major resistance force that any system moving toward a voucher plan will find are arguments related to the support of parochial education. This resistance will appear if the voucher plan includes parochial schools as one of the alternatives for education. The recommendation of this report is that in the Seattle area, to implement a voucher system it is necessary to include the parochial schools in order to provide a significant number of alternatives for the parents who will receive vouchers. Very few opportunities other than parochial schools exist in Seattle at the present time. This may be perceived as a weakness in conducting the voucher demonstration plan in the Seattle area by some persons. If the decision is made to include parochial schools, one might expect all of the traditional arguments regarding the use of tax money to support a religious education. Several controls can be built into the model regarding a reduced amount of money given to private schools if they do include religious education. There are other controls that can be implemented. This issue involves a constitutional or legal consideration which will have to be settled in the courts prior to implementing the program.

A Divisive Plan

The next resistance force that appears is a considerable portion of the population which feels this plan is yet another attempt by those in our society who wish to divide us further. The argument is that our common public schools

have worked together for the common good; consequently, any plan to provide more alternatives for education stressing different kinds of goals would lead to further splitting of society. This group will undoubtedly become more vocal as the alternatives for education become more diverse. Schools that would stress creativity rather than conformity and schools that would focus on goals other than the traditional "three R's" would undoubtedly be under attack.

Decentralization

Implementation of a voucher plan would appear to necessitate further decentralization of an educational system. If a school principal and his staff were to become very competitive to attract parents and children to their program, they would need to be given considerable freedom to adjust their program and allocate all of their physical and human resources in such a way as to make their program attractive. This would be consistent with the trend in large cities and certainly consistent with Seattle's recent efforts to decentralize; but the degree of decentralization would be much greater than what we see at the present time if local school programs are to be held accountable. At this time, predicting the results of greater parent involvement in decision-making in the existing structure of control in public education is largely a matter of speculation. Do parents have greater control in the decision-making process when they cannot get their children into the school of their choice, a situation which could occur under the voucher plan? Particular concern may be aroused when a parent finds his child excluded from a neighborhood school due to the constraints imposed by the quota system of the voucher plan.

Integration

The major consideration for Seattle is how this program would fit into district plans for racially integrating the entire public school system by fall, 1973. If the plan is to have a K-12 integration by that date, it may necessitate a willingness of the School Board to allow implementation of a voucher plan in a

demonstration site that would not be included in any program of mandatory bussing. It should be made clear that this plan need not work at cross purposes with integration. Applications would be carefully reviewed to see that a cross section of the population was applying to all schools and that no schools were predominately black or excluding blacks. It is also possible that if application patterns indicated that integration was not being achieved, then a quota system (see Section IX of the Phase I report) could be included to insure a cross section in the area selected. The major issue, however, is devising a plan of action which insures that the voucher demonstration plan can operate at the same time that other efforts are being made to implement racial integration under the current plan adopted by the Board of Education. If such a plan cannot be developed, then it would be impractical to allow continuation of this experiment. Therefore, there would be no real justification for continuing the study of the feasibility of the voucher plan. In the Seattle area, this seems to be the major consideration in making a decision to proceed with the study.

Neighborhood Schools

To implement a voucher plan which would open all receiving schools to all applicants, the recommended selection process suggests a random selection or lottery process for admission. It should be clearly understood that this process does not give any priority to parents living in that attendance area. Should this process be approved by the School Board, there may be some animosity from groups who support the neighborhood school concept.

With the assumption that many parents will choose schools because of geographical location (convenience) and that some parents will choose alternatives other than the public schools, the probability is high that children will be admitted to their neighborhood public school. It does not assure this choice, however.

Recommendation for Further Study

The recommendation of the feasibility study staff is to continue further planning efforts but only after satisfying the following conditions:

a. That selection of a demonstration site be separate from any area or at least involve grade levels not likely to participate in the mandatory bussing program.

b. That early in Phase II the School Board identify one (or perhaps two) target areas for the demonstration plan. This will be necessary early in Phase II so that parents within that area can be contacted and given as much information as possible about the choices that they would have if the district decided to go ahead. Identifying a target area will narrow the number of individuals involved and enable the study group to intensify dissemination activities. The school district will then be able to assess or predict types of schools parents hope to select.

c. A decision regarding the perceived need for decentralization of authority to principals and/or staff is a major condition prior to the final decision to implement the demonstration project.

d. The superintendent should clearly indicate who will be the primary contact in the Seattle Schools office for the voucher plan. For the initial phases of the study, the Research and Evaluation Office has provided considerable information to the study group, but it now becomes essential that one person be the primary spokesman for the Seattle Schools on the study. Should the district decide to continue, we see this position as a very significant one with a great deal of activity as the study progresses, especially if there are some indications that the voucher system might be developed for the fall of 1972.

e. A second individual will also be needed to promote legislation or to test the feasibility of introducing legislation if some aspects of the plan are to be implemented by fall of 1972.

All future activities depend on a favorable decision by the School Board in order to proceed. Should the Seattle School Board make a decision to continue study, the earliest date that it is perceived the plan could become operational in the demonstration area is the fall of 1972. Time is rapidly becoming a serious constraint. Undue delay in making decisions may have serious effects upon future activities. Many of the activities have been projected with an appropriate time line for their initiation and completion to insure a rapid but systematic approach.

Based on the analysis of data collected during Phase I of the feasibility study, it appears that a voucher demonstration plan is feasible. It is strongly recommended that the Seattle Board of Education authorize continuance of the planning process and that activities as specified for Phase II be undertaken.